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Soviets seen testing chemical weapons on humans

By Tom Diaz
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The Soviet Union is testing deadly chemical and biological weapons on unwilling human subjects "tied to stakes" at a range near Moscow, two defense analysts have charged.

"In 1980, soon after the invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviets conducted lethal chemical and biological tests against men and women tied to stakes in

target areas at the gigantic Shikhany Chemical Test Range located southeast of Moscow and ... such tests are apparently continuing," Quentin Crommelin Jr. and David S. Sullivan charge in their book, "Soviet Military Supremacy," which was released last week.

Angelo Codevilla, an aide to Sen. Malcolm Wallop, R-Wyo., and a former staff member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, confirmed that the Soviets are known to have conducted such tests.

"That is true," he said in an interview last week. He said he knew that "from regular intelligence briefings given to U.S. naval officers 15 years ago" — not, he emphasized, from information obtained while serving on the intelligence committee.

Mr. Codevilla said he doesn't know if the Soviets are still conducting tests on humans.

Experts in the field of chemical and biological warfare said rumors of such

testing are widely known, but they said they had not seen supporting evidence.

Spokesmen for the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the State Department and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency declined to confirm the charge.

Neither Mr. Sullivan nor Mr. Crommelin would give details of the information on which their charge is based.

But another source familiar with national intelligence matters, who spoke on condition that he not be named, said U.S. intelligence officials have "plenty of evidence" of such testing.

"There is loads of photographic evidence plus human intelligence reports," he said. He said he has seen satellite photographs and human intelligence reports documenting the tests.

Other sources in the intelligence community said the Soviets generally know when U.S. spy satellites are in a position to observe their activities and doubted the Soviets would allow such tests to be observed.

Mr. Sullivan, an aide to several conservative senators, worked as an analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency until 1978. Since then, he has worked on Capitol Hill, with the exception of a short stint with the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. Many regard him as an expert on the subject of Soviet violations of strategic arms limitation treaties.

Mr. Crommelin is a Washington lawyer who has worked on the staff of the Senate Armed Services Committee, among others, and on the Defense Department transition team for the first Reagan administration term.

The book, written as a project of the Defense and Strategic Studies program of the University of

Southern California, was cleared for publication by the Central Intelligence Agency, because of Mr. Sullivan's past employment with the agency. A CIA spokesman emphasized, however, that CIA clearance is concerned only with whether a book contains classified information, not with the accuracy of the allegations in it.

The CIA declined to comment on the allegations themselves.

"It [Soviet chemical and biological weapons testing] is a very sensitive subject, and we just haven't released any information on it at all," the spokesman said.

Spokesmen for the DIA, the State Department and the ACDA responded similarly.

"I am unable to confirm the information," a DIA spokesman said.

"We don't have any information on that at all," said an ACDA spokesman.

But the source who claims to have seen the evidence of the tests insisted that U.S. officials are well aware of the tests.

"We've seen the stakes, we've seen the people," he said. "We've seen just animals [tied to the stakes], we've seen just people, and we've seen both together."

"They are testing the [chemical and biological] agents to see how long it takes to kill," the source said. "We've seen people down. We don't know if they're dead or wounded."

The source said "humint," or human intelligence reports, "told us they [the victims] are political prisoners."

He also said, "We've seen crematoriums nearby."

"We know they cremate the animals," he said. "We don't know how they dispose of the [human] bodies. We assume they cremate them."

The source said the United States has been able to observe the alleged testing "only fortuitously."

But, he said, "We've seen hundreds [of people tied to stakes], and we have to assume that if we've seen hundreds they've tested many more."

Other analysts were cautious in their reactions to the charges.

"I have heard the allegations," said Brad Roberts, a fellow at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies. "They are fairly widely known. But I don't know if they are accurate."

Mr. Roberts said the allegation is "not incredible," but that he would be "surprised" if it were true because the Soviet chemical warfare program is so advanced there is little need for such experimentation.

The Shikhany complex was built in the 1920s and is "one of the Soviets' primary chemical weapons test areas," according to a 1983 Defense Department report on Soviet chemical weapons capabilities.

"It [the allegation] is sometimes confused with the fact that the Soviets train on a very large scale with the real stuff and they sometimes lose troops," Mr. Roberts said.

Robert H. Kupperman, director of science and technology at CSIS, said, "I've heard it, but I've seen no evidence."